The Sun.

BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

TWELVE PAGES

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MAY 18, 1919.

SECTION SIX

A Yankee Flier's Story

Captain Rickenbacker's Book About Himself and Other Knights Who Tilted in the Tournaments of the Skies of France

THE most complete and satisfying narrative by a war aviator that has yet appeared is *Fighting the Flying Circus*, the personal experiences of Captain Edward V. Rickenbacker, commanding officer of the Ninety-fourth Pursuit Squadron—the Hat in the Ring Squadron. Rickenbacker, besides being the leader of the most active American air squadron, which had about seventy official victories, is himself credited with twenty-six kills. In a foreword to the book Laurence La Tourette Driggs, a keen student of aerial warfare, declares that if Rickenbacker had been a free lance he would have doubled his own score, even in the short period of America's service in the war.

Captain Rickenbacker's book does not keep the reader waiting. He avoids not only the story of his going to France as General Pershing's driver but also the details of his training as a flier, and he jumps right into his first flight, under Major Lufbery's wing, across the German lines. From that first page on it is war—war to the crash. It tells not only of the strategy of aerial battle, which is different in almost every fight, but of the various adventures of himself and his courageous American associates, not limiting the tales to the men of his own squadron.

II.

Who was the greatest fighting pilot of the war? Rickenbacker says it was an American, Frank Luke of the Twenty-seventh Squadron, who shot down thirteen balloons in six days. Balloons, by the way, looked easy to the new airman, but they were a puzzle to him when he tackled them. Either the gas was not inflammable or the bullet went through the bag so rapidly that the gas was not ignited. Also, to tackle a balloon which was comparatively near the earth meant a journey through a perfect storm of Archies. At dusk one day last September Frank Luke pointed out to his companions at the American aerodrome two German balloons in the sky two miles back of the Boche lines and about four miles apart.

"You will see," he said, "the first one go up in flames exactly at 7:15; and the other will do likewise at 7:19."

And Rickenbacker declares that Luke made good his prophecies almost to the very second!

On another occasion, in less than twenty minutes, Luke shot down two balloons, two fighting Fokkers and a photographing machine. That little job put him temporarily ahead of Rickenbacker among the American aces. Luke had gained fourteen official victories in eight days. No other aviator, says Rickenbacker—not even Guynemer, or Fonck, or Ball, or Bishop, or Richthofen—ever equalled that. What became of Luke nobody knows. He sailed away one evening for his favorite sport of killing balloons, and he never was heard of again. The Germans could give no clue to the mystery. Like Guynemer, says Rickenbacker, Luke was swallowed by the skies.

© by H. LAZARNICK

Capt. Edward V. Rickenbacker

III.

Captain Rickenbacker tells a story about Quentin Roosevelt which may interest the War Department as well as the ordinary reader. Young Roosevelt, who was the most popular man in the Ninety-fifth Squadron, was made a Flight Commander before he had ever flown over the lines, his commanding officer having been "moved perhaps by the fact that Quentin was the son of Theodore Roosevelt." Quentin, who seems to have had more sense than his chief, declined the honor, but "his superiors directed him to obey orders." Three men, all more experienced than Quentin, were placed under his command. The first time the group started out Lieut. Roosevelt said to the most experienced of his men: "You, Buckley, are to be flight commander in my place. As soon as we leave the ground you take the lead. I will drop into your place. We will try out each man in turn. They may make me flight commander in name, but the best pilot in my group is going to lead it in fact." And that condition of affairs continued until Quentin Roosevelt's death, on July 14, 1918, in a "dog-fight" with Richthofen's circus ten miles back of the German lines. Of Quentin's bravery Capt. Rickenbacker says:

"He was reckless to such a degree that his commanding officers had to caution him repeatedly about the senselessness of his lack of caution. His bravery was so notorious that we all knew he would either achieve some great spectacular success or be killed in the attempt. Even the pilots in his own flight would beg him to conserve himself and wait for a fair opportunity for a victory. But Quentin would merely laugh away all serious advice." Once he followed a Hun squadron, thinking it was his own. When he discovered his mistake he shot down the German machine in front of him and streaked it for home. That incident was a puzzle to the methodical German mind. Why should a Yankee have trailed the German squadron for fifteen minutes before shooting it up?

IV.

Capt. Rickenbacker describes briefly the early attitude of the allied airmen toward their American cousins:

"The British and French had had three years and more of air fighting, and the veterans of these squadrons looked upon the American pilots with something of amusement and something of polite contempt. They had believed in the story of our twenty thousand aeroplanes which had been promised by April. Here was April at hand and we were flying ill equipped machines that we fortunately had been able to wangle out of the French and English."

It is best to quote verbatim what Rickenbacker says about the Liberty airplanes. He is telling of the bombing operations in the Grand Pré neighborhood:

"From every side Fokkers were piquing [diving vertically] upon the clumsy Liberty machines which, with their criminally constructed fuel tanks, offered so easy a target to the incendiary bullets of the enemy that their unfortunate pilots called this boasted achievement of our aviation department their 'flaming coffins.' During that one brief fight over Grand Pré I saw three of these crude machines go down in flames, an American pilot and an American gunner in each 'flaming coffin' dying this frightful and needless death."

V.

On the familiar subject of the "chivalry of the air" Capt. Rickenbacker touches briefly. Early in the game, he says, he decided that he would never shoot a Hun who was at a disadvantage. It is to be supposed that he means that he would not and did not shoot an enemy whose ammunition was gone or who already was plunging toward the earth. Once, in a fight with a Fokker of Richthofen's circus, he saw that the foe's motor had "gone dud." The German started to plane toward home, being even then two miles inside the German lines. Rickenbacker headed him off and shepherded him, like a dog turning a sheep, toward the American lines. The Fokker pilot had the choice of going or being shot. Rickenbacker's object was to capture the Fokker uninjured and use it himself. But the scheme was spoiled, for a Spad, the nationality of whose pilot Rickenbacker never discovered, rushed out from the clouds and began shooting at the Fokker. At last Rickenbacker's wig-wagging made the foolish friend understand that the German was really a prisoner, but the damage was done. Turned from its path, the Fokker quickly dropped and was smashed, although the pilot crawled from the ruins, waved his thanks to Rick and then surrendered to the doughboys, who had watched the strange doings above them.

Were the Germans as chivalrous in the matter of shooting a helpless enemy? They were not. In three or four of Rickenbacker's anecdotes the Germans fired on the American machine after it was doomed—after it was whizzing earthward, lost beyond hope. And after one Yankee airman had fallen among the ruins of his machine in a shell hole the Fokkers followed and emptied their guns at him.

FIGHTING THE FLYING CIRCUS. By Captain Edward V. Rickenbacker. Frederick A. Stokes Company. $1.50.